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Waller County puts off decision on campus early-voting site

Decision on whether to use Prairie View as site debated, postponed

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Donald Barnett, left, makes his point with Republican County Party Chair Wallace Koinning on Wednesday as Waller County commissioners discussed having early voting centers at Prairie View A&M.

Photo: Elizabeth Conley, Staff

A call to add an early-voting site at the campus of a historically black college in Waller County came to an impasse Wednesday, as commissioners and members of the public debated whether it were needed and where it would go.

County commissioners voted 3-2 to postpone a decision on whether to offer two days of early voting at Prairie View A&M University ahead of the March 1 primary. County Judge Trey Duhon and Commissioner Jeron Barnett dissented.

The meeting took place before a packed room at the Waller County Courthouse in Hempstead. It was the third time the five-person court had discussed early-voting polling places for the rural county west of Houston.

An original proposal, approved Dec. 16, involved two polling places, neither of which was located in the same precinct as the school. A second proposal, approved Dec. 23, established seven sites, including one within walking distance of the campus.

On Wednesday, supporters of adding an on-campus polling place for early voting alluded to its importance in righting past wrongs faced by students of the college.

"You have the chance today to continue to move our county forward," county Democratic party chairman Ben Tibbs told commissioners as the meeting got underway. "I urge you to do so."

Waller County Elections Administrator Dan Teed called the seven-site plan "insufficient." He called for starting a new chapter in the county's history and seizing an opportunity to work together for that change.

"Governing in Waller County is exhausting," Teed said. "It is physically demolishing to your health."

Waller County Precinct 3 Constable Herschel Smith, whose precinct includes the school, said "Amen" from his seat.

As the meeting continued, however, debate surfaced over whether a polling site at the university's student center would be difficult to monitor and access. A college representative assured commissioners that parking and assistance to voters would be provided.

Tension was palpable as people muttered comments while others spoke, stood with a hand raised or raised their voices in frustration.

About 40 minutes into the discussion, Commissioner Russell Klecka said he felt that his own precinct was underserved by the current plan. Commissioner Justin Beckendorff observed that the current plan didn't seem to obstruct anyone from voting.

Beckendorff added that people had given their lives for the right to vote, so constituents could skip a lunch to get to a polling place. Commissioner John Amsler agreed: People somehow had managed to travel 25 miles to see "Star Wars."

The minutes ticked on - as did the debate. "This is going nowhere," Amsler said. He moved to table the discussion. The crowd groaned.

Duhon plans to renew the discussion at the Jan. 27 meeting.

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